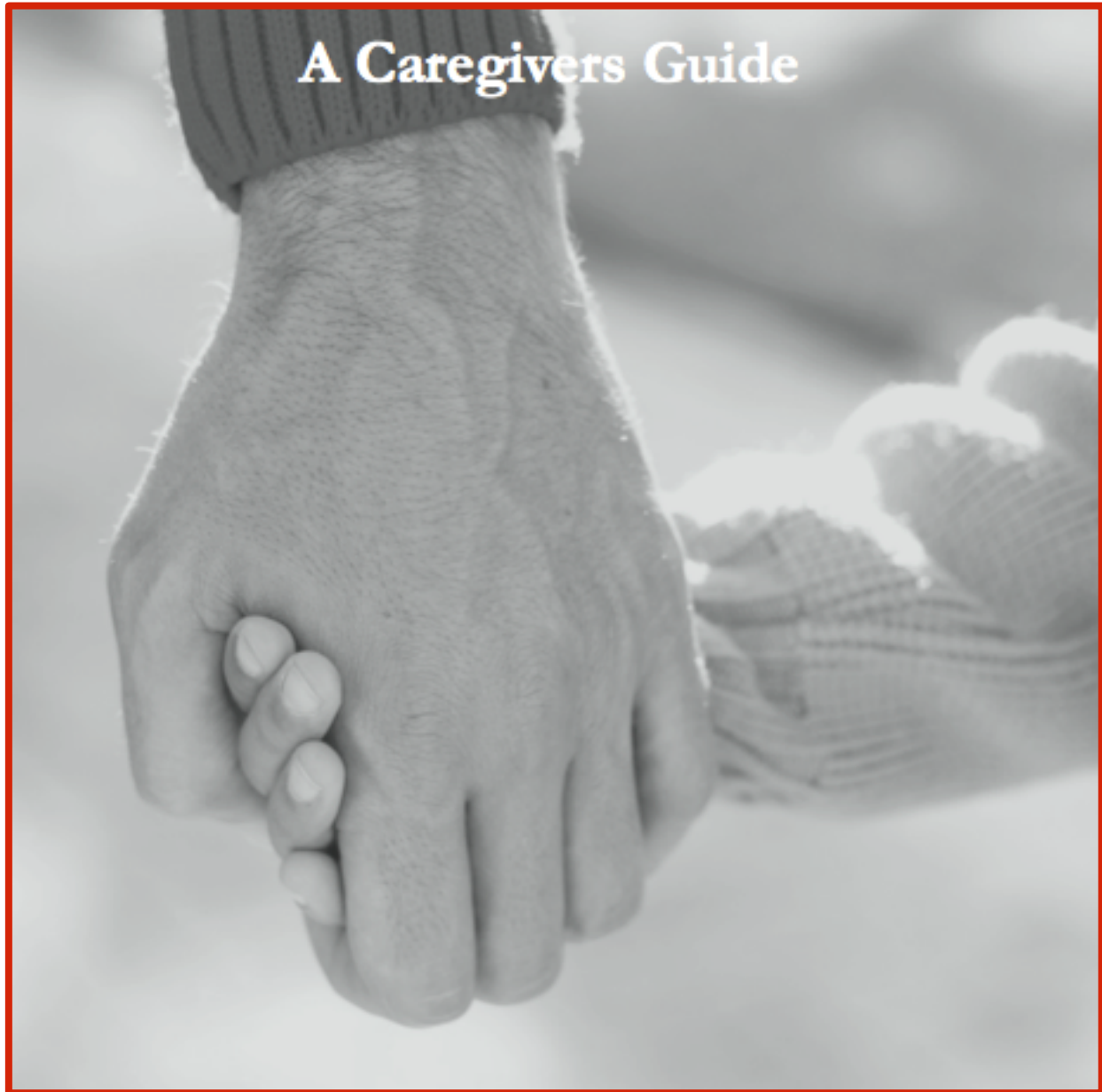


# How to explain Jails and Prisons to Children



Provided by the  
Children of Incarcerated Parents Network of Lancaster County  
and

Lancaster County **RMO** Re-Entry Management Organization

313 W. Liberty St., Suite 114 Lancaster, PA 17603 717-735-0333

This publication has been compiled and is provided by the  
Children of Incarcerated Parents Network  
of Lancaster County, PA

and

Lancaster County  Re-Entry Management Organization

313 W. Liberty St., Suite 114   Lancaster, PA 17603   717-735-0333

313 W. Liberty St, Suite 114  
Lancaster, PA 17603  
717-735-0333

<http://lancastercountyreentry.org/>

*We gratefully acknowledge the Initiative Foundation of Minnesota, and the Inside-Out Connections project: Supporting Children with Incarcerated Parents, who graciously allowed us to adapt their materials for this booklet.*

*In addition, we are grateful to Dee Ann Newell, M.A., Arkansas Voices for the Children Left Behind who also gave us permission to use some of the materials she has developed.*

## Table of Contents

Introduction .....	4
About Families .....	5
Glossary of Terms .....	5
Notes for Children.....	6
Looking for Support.....	10
Ten Tips for Kinship Caregivers of Children of Incarcerated Parents .....	11
Common Questions Kids Ask.....	12
Mom or dad: it's important to write letters to your child .....	16
Tips for visiting parents in prison.....	18
Stages of Re-Entry for Children of a Parent Returning from Prison.....	20
Risk Factors for Children with Incarcerated Parents .....	21
This is Hard Work! What About Me? .....	22
Children of Incarcerated Parent "A Bill of Rights" .....	23
Resources for Children of Incarcerated Parents, Their Caregivers & Professionals Who Work With Them .....	24

## Introduction

***This booklet is designed to help moms, dads, and caregivers to answer children's questions about jail and prison.***

Parental incarceration is not a rare event. Nell Bernstein, author of *All Alone in the World: Children of the Incarcerated*, writes, and “three in every hundred American children have a parent behind bars”.<sup>1</sup> When parents are arrested or put in jail or prison, their children are often scared, confused, and upset. This booklet is designed to help moms, dads, and caregivers answer children's questions about jail and prison.

It can be stressful and scary for children and adults to deal with having a loved one in prison. It is important for you as the parent or caregiver of a child with an incarcerated parent to get information and support for yourself and your child. When families get accurate information and have strong community support, it's easier to understand and deal with some of the stress of having a family member or close friend in jail or prison.

---

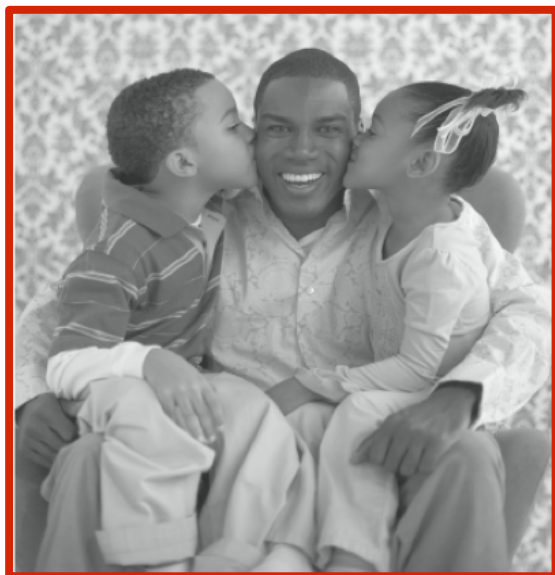
*... you do not have to do this alone. Seek out friends, family and community support as you and your child work through this difficult situation.*

---

This booklet was written as a resource for families, to help with open and honest communication between children and adults. If your children are old enough to read this booklet on their own, you may want to just talk with them about it. If your children are too young to understand it on their own, you can read it with them, and then talk with them about the information in this booklet. All children need support from adults who will talk with them in an emotionally safe, comforting and nurturing way.

A child's bond with his/her parent is important, no matter where that parent lives or what behaviors that parent has shown. You can help the child keep a bond with his/her parent in many ways. It will not always be appropriate for a parent to keep in contact with their child. It is always important to respect the feelings the child has for their parent. Children love their parents unconditionally and do not always understand issues in the adult world. Keep this in mind as you are helping your child cope.

Please remember that you do not have to do this alone. Seek out friends, family and community support as you and your child work through this difficult situation.



---

<sup>1</sup> Nell Bernstein, *All Alone in the World: Children of the Incarcerated* (New Press, 2005) 4.

## About Families

There are all kinds of families. Sometimes children live with their mother and father. Sometimes they live with their mother or their father. Some children have stepparents or foster parents. Others live with grandparents, aunts or uncles, adult siblings, or other family members.

When a caregiver is incarcerated, children may change homes to live with:

- The other parent.
- Another family member.
- Another family in foster care.
- A family friend.

Sometimes, these changes may mean moving to a different neighborhood, school, town, or even a different state. It is possible brothers and sisters may have to live with different people.

***All of these changes can be very hard for children.  
For children who are able to read and write, it may be helpful to  
write down where family members are living during this time,  
using the form on the next page.***

For very young children, you may want to sit down together to fill out the chart on the following page, or you could ask them to draw pictures of family members and where they are living. Teens may feel more comfortable writing in a journal or talking through this information with a trusted adult.

## Glossary of Terms

*The words used in the criminal justice system are often confusing because they can mean different things in different places. Here are some definitions that might be helpful:*

**Conditions:** Rules that a person who has been convicted of a crime must follow. These are set by the court. If the person doesn't follow their conditions, they may have to go (or go back to) jail or prison.

**Incarcerated:** Another word for being in prison or jail.

**Inmates:** People who are incarcerated.

**Jail:** a place where people who have been accused or convicted of crimes are confined or *incarcerated*. Usually, people stay in jail if they are sentenced for less than two years or if they are waiting for their trial.

**Prison:** places where people who have been accused or convicted of crimes are confined or *incarcerated*. If people receive a sentence for two years or more, they go to prison.

**Returning Citizen:** a person who is released from jail or prison and returning to live in the community

**Sentence:** The length of time of a person's incarceration.

**Visitation:** Time when family members can visit loved ones at the jail or prison.

## Notes for Children

### ***About my family:***

My name is \_\_\_\_\_

I live at: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

I live with: \_\_\_\_\_

My Mom is: \_\_\_\_\_

She lives at: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

My Dad is: \_\_\_\_\_

He lives at: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

My brother(s) and sister(s) are: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

My brother(s) and sister(s) live at: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

### **People to talk to**

Someone in my family: \_\_\_\_\_

Someone at my school: \_\_\_\_\_

Someone at my place of worship: \_\_\_\_\_

Another adult I trust: \_\_\_\_\_

A close friend: \_\_\_\_\_

## Feelings and Emotions

When a family member goes to jail or prison, it may be very difficult for everyone involved. For some children, the experience can be emotionally devastating, for others it is less serious, and for some, it is a relief.

There are many factors in how a parent's incarceration affects a child, including the child's age, how well they understand the situation, and the reactions of family, friends and their community.

### **New, strong feelings are normal**

Children may have strong feelings about their parent being in prison or jail, including some feelings they haven't felt before. They may also have several feelings all at once - sadness, fear, guilt, disbelief, anxiety, anger, and/or powerlessness. It is important to help children understand and deal with their feelings. Giving their feelings a name can be a starting place.

### **Toddler Emotions Chart**



**HAPPY**



**SAD**



**MAD**



## How do I feel today?

Sad



Embarrassed



Lonely



Shy



I feel....



Happy



Overwhelmed



Angry



Confused





## Ideas for Older Children

With teens, writing in a journal may be helpful and they may need some help describing how they are feeling. Use the words below to help describe feelings that are more complicated.

### List of Words for Older Children

- **Apathetic:** Don't care about anything, not interested in anything, don't want to do anything
- **Chaotic:** Disorganized, out of control
- **Inadequate:** Feeling like you're not good enough
- **Indifferent:** Don't care what happens, one way or the other
- **Lethargic:** Tired, no energy



## Looking for Support

***Children should be encouraged to reach out to those they trust.  
They can be encouraged to make a list of people to talk to.***

Sometimes adults don't talk about the incarcerated parent because they are afraid it will upset the child. However, when the child is upset or hurt or confused, it is better for the child to talk about those feelings to others instead of bottling the feelings up inside.

Children might worry and think things are worse than they really are if a parent "disappears" and no one talks about it or lets them talk about it.

Children should be encouraged to reach out to those they trust. They can be encouraged to make a list of people to talk to.

Sometimes, children and families need more help than family and friends can provide. There are resources and organizations in Lancaster County that can

---

*... when the child is upset or hurt or confused, it is better for the child to talk about those feelings to others instead of bottling the feelings up inside.*

---

help children, families and people who are incarcerated to meet lots of needs, both during the parent's incarceration and after they are released. See RESOURCES on page 24 at the end of this publication.

Children may have lots of different mixed-up feelings from the time their parent is arrested until after the parent gets out of prison or jail. While children might have these feelings at any time, they are more likely to be strong feelings at certain times: at time of the parent's arrest, trial, sentencing, incarceration (and often most strongly during and following a visit), and when the parent is released.

Often, the most stressful time comes during the weeks and months after the parent is released. When a child has gotten used to living without the parent around, it can be hard for the parent to reconnect with the child. While reconnecting can take some time, parents can succeed in reconnecting with their child if they work hard at it. The bond between a parent and child is a very special thing and is worth fighting for.



# Ten Tips for Kinship Caregivers of Children of Incarcerated Parents

By Dee Ann Newell, M.A., Arkansas Voices for the Children Left Behind. Used with permission of the author.

1. Recognize that the children have probably endured multiple traumas and may have behaviors that are reactive to these, including withdrawal, anxiety, isolation, or aggressive and unpredictable behaviors.
2. Keep the communication door open with children. Proactively let them know you are accepting of their feelings and to feel safe expressing them to you in words. You have to tell them this even when you think that they should know this.
3. Recognize your own ambivalence toward the incarcerated parent as it can bewilder the child who, in turn, feels conflicted in loyalties and may shut down their sharing with you.
4. Realize that there is often grieving and mourning in the worlds of these children, and rituals and symbols help to comfort the children.
5. Tell them stories about yourself as a child, allowing you to share some of the times you were conflicted and were successful in working out your conflicts, both inner conflicts and conflicts with others.
6. When seeking counseling for the child in your care, and many need the professional help of mental health providers, be sure that the therapist has experience and compassion for children of incarcerated parents. Some of the typical prejudice in our society regarding incarcerated parents also exists with professionals who have not been trained in the research and understanding of these children.
7. If there has been a relationship with the parent in prison, and there has been no violence perpetrated against the child by their parent, permit the children to visit and receive letters and phone calls, with economics determining the frequency due to the high cost of prison calls. This is so important if the parent will be returning during the childhood of the child, as sustaining the relationship is critical to the well-being of the children. However, children of parents with longer sentences also need to maintain contact and the sentence length should not determine if there is a relationship.
8. Never force a child to visit their parent, but if they wish to, be sure to prepare them for the visit, the security protocols, the dress code, long waits, the presence of guards, and the change in appearance of their parent.
9. Know the visiting rules and teach them to the children.
10. Always tell the child the truth about the incarceration of the parent. Deception will only create more fear.

## Common Questions Kids Ask

Here are some common questions children ask and some ideas that might help you, as a caregiver, to answer the child's questions. There are different ways to answer these questions, depending on how old and how mature the child is. Everyone's situation is different.

**Most importantly, always answer truthfully.**

### ***Why did mom or dad go to jail or prison?***

People are sent to jail or prison because they did not obey the law. Laws are rules that tell us how people should behave.

Children have rules of behavior too. When children break the rules, they may get a time out or lose privileges. Prison and jail are like long time outs for adults.

When talking with older children and teens, you can explain that all actions have consequences and jail or prison is a consequence for breaking the law. Talk with your child about what their rules for behavior are, and the consequences for breaking them.

### ***What will happen to me?***

A child's life might change a lot when a parent goes to jail or prison. It's hard for a child to worry about what will happen to them. Children often ask these questions about what their life will be like, with their parent in prison or jail. Be prepared to answer these questions for your child.

*How long will my parent be in jail or prison?*

*Will I live in the same place?*

*Will I have to move?*

*Will I be able to live with my parent when he or she gets out of jail or prison?*



***Is it my fault that mommy or daddy went to jail?***

**NO!** Many children feel guilt when their parent goes to jail or prison. They may believe that they caused it to happen.

It is very important to give children a safe, relaxed place where they won't be judged, where they can talk about their feelings, thoughts and beliefs about why their parent is in prison or jail. It is important to help children understand:

- There are negative consequences when a parent breaks the law.
- Children are not responsible for a parent's behavior or the consequences of the parent's behavior.

***Will I go to jail or prison, too?***

Just because a parent is in prison or jail does not mean the child will follow in that parent's footsteps either now or in the future. Help the child understand how important it is for them to make good choices and let the child know that he or she is a good person.

***Where do people in jail or prison live?***

People in jail live in dorms or cells that are usually very small and all look alike. They usually have a bed, sink, desk, and toilet. Showers are available in each prison and jail.

***Where do people in jail or prison eat, and what kind of food?***

Most people eat in a dining room that looks a lot like a school cafeteria. Most of the time, people in jail or prison go through a line to choose which foods they want to eat. In some prisons, food is brought to people on trays. There are usually some choices for people with special dietary needs like vegetarian meals, pork-free, or low-salt diets.

***What do people in jail or prison wear?***

Each jail or prison is different. In many prisons and jails, people wear orange, tan, or dark green jumpsuits or hospital scrubs. In some prisons, people wear denim pants, blue button down shirts, and blue jackets. In others, they may wear brown or khaki colored shirts and pants. In some prisons, they can also purchase some other items like grey sweatpants and sweatshirts. They are not allowed to wear baseball caps or stocking hats inside.

***Do people in jail or prison work?***

Sometimes, people have jobs inside the prison or jail. Other times they go to special classes. Some prisons and jails have a work release program that is a privilege that lets someone in jail to go to a job outside the jail during the day, and then go back to the jail to sleep at night.

### ***How do people in jail or prison spend their time?***

People in jail or prison might work or go to school or attend special programs such as alcohol and drug treatment, anger management courses, or parenting education classes. Most prisons and jails have libraries so people can sign out books. Most jails and prisons also have a law library so that people can work on their own court cases. Some prisons also have chapels or places where people can attend worship services or religious education programs.

Many people in jails and prisons can do other things like draw or paint, read, write, watch TV, or exercise when they have spare time. In some prisons, people can buy their own TV. Usually there are special TV rooms where everyone shares the television and people have to take turns choosing the channels they like.

### ***Can they go outside?***

There is usually a time for going outside for an hour or two, called “yard time”. People can walk or jog around the yard, play sports or lift weights. Different prisons and jails have different activities available.

### ***Are people in jail or prison safe and healthy?***

Correctional officers work hard to keep the jail or prison safe. If people in jail or prison get sick or hurt, they may ask to see a nurse, doctor, or dentist.

### ***Can I see or talk to mom or dad when they are in jail or prison? Do I have to?***

There are several ways for children to stay connected with a parent while they are away. It can be very helpful to the children and the parent if they can stay in touch by writing letters or visiting while the parent is in prison or jail. As the caregiver, encourage your child to stay in touch with their incarcerated parent in whatever way is best for the child.

Sometimes, the child might not be able to visit their parent. Sometimes the parent is too far away. Sometimes the child might not want to visit their parent in prison or jail. or the parent may choose not to be visited by the child, not wanting the child to experience the prison environment and/or the difficulty the parent and/or child would face in separating at the end of the visit. And sometimes there are rules or restraining orders that say the parent is not allowed to have any type of contact with the child.

#### ***1. Writing letters to mom or dad***

Writing letters is a great way for children to communicate with their parent. It is less expensive than other methods, and children can write about what is happening in their lives in a letter to their parent. Sometimes the child can even send photos. Young children who can't write a letter can draw pictures for their parent. Be sure to check the prison or jail's rules for incoming mail before a child sends a card, letter or drawing to a parent. Some prisons and jails do not allow anything that has been made with crayons, stickers, glue, or glitter due to security issues.

## ***2. How can I talk to mom or dad on the phone?***

Phone calls may be another way for children to stay in touch with their parent in jail or prison. It can be comforting for the child to hear a parent's voice. Let the child know ahead of time how long they will be able to talk, so they are not surprised when the call ends. Remember:

- Phone calls are more expensive than writing letters. The parent who is in prison or jail has to call the child. Children and family members are not able to call the prison to speak to their loved one.
- The parent who is in prison or jail might have restrictions on who they are allowed to call.
- The parent in prison or jail will need to have permission or approval from prison staff to make phone calls, and they have to get permission ahead of time to call a specific phone number. This can be difficult if your phone number changes.

## ***3. Visiting mom or dad***

Visiting rules are different at each prison or jail. You have to arrange visits in advance, and it might take some time to get permission to visit. In some cases, visits might not be allowed: for example, due to a restraining order, a Department of Corrections (DOC) rule, or a child's preference. See the section titled "Visiting Tips" later in this booklet. You may have to take along a child's birth certificate and/or other proof of the child's relationship to the incarcerated parent for the child to be allowed to visit.

## ***What do I tell other people?***

Many people are ashamed to talk about having someone close to them in jail or prison. It may help children feel better if you explain to them that:

- "There are other children in this situation, too. You are not alone."
- "You didn't do anything wrong. People shouldn't try to make you feel guilty or ashamed."
- "It might be easier not to talk about a parent who is incarcerated, but then you may never learn that there are other kids in the same situation. Talking about it with people you trust may help."
- "It's okay to love your mom or dad who is in jail or prison, even if some people don't understand."

Others outside the family (including other children) may judge or tease the child because they don't understand the situation. You can tell the child that they don't have to talk about this with everyone. It is up to them if they want to tell people. Tell the child that you are always available for them to talk with, and that you want them to share their feelings. Look at the list of trusted people from earlier in this booklet and encourage your child to talk with those people.

See RESOURCES on page 24

In Lancaster County, PA, there are support groups and programs for children who have a parent who is incarcerated. There are also support groups and programs for caregivers and adult family members.



## A message for the incarcerated parent!

### **Mom or dad: it's important to write letters to your child**

By Dee Ann Newell, M.A., Arkansas Voices for the Children Left Behind. Used with permission of author.

*(NOTE TO CAREGIVERS: Though the following is addressed to the incarcerated parent, it is important for you to be aware of how important letters from an incarcerated parent can be to a child. This is something you should support and encourage, if appropriate. You might even consider copying these pages and sending them to your child's incarcerated parent.*

Having worked for more than two decades with incarcerated parents and their children, I wanted to share my observation on the importance of letter writing. My agency, Arkansas Voices Left Behind, utilizes letter writing as part of our parenting from prison and jail curricula, as well as a way to provide support for the children left behind. I have had the chance to read letters written by the parent, read letters received by the child, and read letters written by the children to their parents. Here are my insights based on these different lenses of observation.

When children are separated from their parents due to parental incarceration, many parents re-discover the almost-lost art form of letter writing. While phone calls and contact visits are also important, letter writing offers a valuable form of communication – one that is tangible and can be read and re-read by a child throughout their life.

---

*While phone calls and contact visits are also important, letter writing offers a valuable form of communication – one that is tangible and can be read and re-read by a child throughout their life.*

---

First, regardless of what your child may say, **children need someone who will love them unconditionally**, a love that is invaluable when it comes from a separated parent. Children are always looking to their parents for this acceptance. When they feel that you truly value them, you provide them with the courage and resilience to overcome feelings of self-doubt, knowing that they have a place in this world because they have a place of value with their parent.

Many parents, both inside and outside of prison, take it for granted that their children know how special they are to their parent. However, most parents do not communicate this acceptance and love in a concrete or repetitive manner. This is especially difficult for parents separated by prison or jail walls and their children are coping with the loss of the parent in their daily lives. The children don't have the opportunity to observe the parental love in small, daily ways that those of us on the outside take for granted. Sometimes, the children are torn between caregivers who may or may not allow collect phone calls from you, or may even forbid them to write letters to their incarcerated parents. However, if your child's caregiver permits them to receive your letters, these letters offer a genuine way for a parent inside to communicate the sought-for message of acceptance, value, worthiness in a way that children 'hear' the message. The letter is a message that they can read again and again. Many children have told me they sleep with these letters. Many children have shared these letters with me, and those that receive them too infrequently will tell me how often they return to the letters for comfort and soothing of their loss. Letters matter to the children of incarcerated parents.

## Now, here is a chance to write to your child . . .

### First, some suggestions:

1. It is important to focus on the child in the letter, but avoid asking questions that place the child in an awkward position if the caregiver is also reading the letter. Write words of encouragement, such as:

*"I think of you often and wonder what you are doing, hoping it is interesting or fun."*

*"I admire (like, love, appreciate, value) the kind of caring person you are becoming."*

*"I have noticed or hear from (your grandmother, father, and foster parent) about how hard you work at school."*

*"I admire you for the efforts you are putting out. I believe that being willing to work hard is so important in all that you do."*

2. Briefly share with your child that you are well, getting along with so-and-so, doing so-and-so. Reassure your child that you are okay. Please avoid telling them

---

***Briefly share with your child that you are well, getting along with so-and-so, doing so-and-so.***

***Reassure your child that you are okay.***

---

your troubles, health issues, fears, woes, or anxieties, especially for younger children. Also, avoid attempting to discipline the child through a letter. For example, if someone has told you some negative behavior or attitude of the child, avoid being the source of negative complaints about their behavior. Because you are not there, try not attempt to correct behaviors or attitudes with a letter, but do keep the door open for them to share with you their feelings, fears, offering them a listening ear without judgment. Parents who are incarcerated cannot discipline effectively long-distance and your frequently re-read letters are not the place to state a negative opinion of the

child, from someone else or from you. You are the encourager, perhaps the most important encourager in your child's life during your separation; your role as disciplinarian will come after you are back.

### Second, here is an excerpt from an actual letter from an incarcerated mother in prison to her daughter:

*When you are going through a difficult time, you may wonder if you're making the right choice. You may wonder about how things will work out. Make sure the choice you make feels right to you and that you have prayed about it. I know you for who you are. You are a very strong and a very intelligent and motivated young lady. And you can and will face the challenges that come to you, and make the right choices for you. And never forget that you are a very loving and warm person with a lot to give others, as well as to receive love from others..."*

\*\*\*\*\*

*This is the kind of letter that inspires and reassures children. This mother has given her child some things to think about, ways to be positive about herself, convey unconditional acceptance while encouraging and nurturing qualities, character skills, mindfulness and encouragement. This letter represents a few of the things that a child of an incarcerated parent needs from their parent.*

## Tips for visiting parents in prison

When a child visits their parent in prison, it can be a positive experience. However it can also bring up strong feelings for everyone. Even though visits can be difficult, visits are important for children because:

- Children love and miss their parents, and they worry about their parents.
- Visits can let children know that their parents are okay.
- Visits help to keep a special bond between parents and children.

But some parts of visiting can be upsetting for children. They may see some things that will upset them. The fact that they have to leave their parent behind at the end of a visit can be upsetting too. It's important to prepare children for visits. Call or visit the jail or prison ahead of time to find out what security procedures the child will have to go through, and to get other information about the visiting policy. Ask what documents or forms of ID you have to bring as proof of the child's relationship to the incarcerated parent, so you don't risk being turned away and not being allowed to go through with the visit.



Before the visit, explain to the child what will happen during the security check when they first go into the prison or jail. Explain that security checks are important to keep everyone safe. Describe what the visiting area looks and sounds like. Let them know that there will be guards in uniforms in the visiting room, to be sure everyone follows the visiting rules and the visit is safe. Answer any questions the child might have before the visit. Be

honest with the child and share information as appropriate for the child's age. You know your child and what he/she can handle. Keep in mind their age, what they know about their parent's situation, and how mature the child is emotionally as you decide how to explain things. Give your child enough details so they feel prepared for the situation, but not so many details that they are scared or overwhelmed.

Visiting policies are different in each prison or jail. Explain what the visit will be like for the child. It is helpful for the child to have information ahead of time so they know what to expect. It is a good idea to explain to the child:

- How the visit will take place (in person, with glass in-between or on a television monitor).
- What can and can't happen during the visit (hugs, the incarcerated parent cannot leave with you).
- Whether there are toys or games to play with, a table to sit at, vending machines, etc.
- Let the child know that their parent will be wearing a "uniform."

### ***Can my Mommy / Daddy leave with me?***

Children need to understand that their parent can't come home with them at the end of the visit. You might need to explain this to young children more than once. While it is hard to say and to hear, you can tell the child that the visit is a special time and that their parent loves them and looks forward to these visits. It might help to let the child know that both children and adults may feel sad at the end of the visit, and this is normal.

### **When the Visit Ends**

Talk to your child before the visit about how the visit will end. The end of a visit can be painful, difficult and sad, but there are ways to help make the good-bye time easier:

- If you know how long the visit will be, tell the child ahead of time in terms they will understand. Let them know you will be telling them when the visit is 10 minutes from being over. This way they have time to start getting ready to say good-bye and are not shocked when they have to leave the parent.
- Plan ahead and ask the child how he/she would like to say good-bye to the parent (keep in mind any prison rules about physical contact – hugs, etc). The child might want to give their parent a hug, sing a song, or just say good-bye.
- Bring a photo of the parent for your child to look at on the way home after the visit. While this isn't the same as being with the parent, a photo might help the child feel the parent's presence.
- Right after the visit, your child may feel very sad or upset. You might think you should try to make them happy right away by giving them a treat or gift. But the best thing to do is to ask your child how he/she is feeling and allow the child some time to just feel whatever they are feeling. Let them know their feelings are okay. Let the child know they can talk about the visit and their feelings if they want to.
- Encourage your child to draw or write in a diary or journal about the visit and their feelings.
- It is important to support a child by not saying bad things about the parent in front of them (even if you are frustrated or angry with that parent).



\*Adapted from the NYC Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents: Visiting Tips. The Osborne Association. [www.osborneny.org](http://www.osborneny.org)

Caregivers: plan for mom or dad's release from prison

## **Stages of Re-Entry for Children of a Parent Returning from Prison**

By Dee Ann Newell, M.A., Arkansas Voices for the Children Left Behind. Used with permission of the author.

1. **Celebratory/Honeymoon:** Children are initially excited with the presence of their parent in the home or community, and out of the prison. Heightened expectations need to be lowered for all, parent, child, and caregiver. Danger of parent "celebrating " if drugs were part of the lifestyle, or becoming depressed and suicidal as they run into multiple barriers. All family members need to be watchful for signs of depression; close supportive services are needed.
2. **Velcro:** Children begin to experience the old anxiety about the parent leaving and may become clingy and regressive. Parent needs to be advised and supported in parenting programs or other supportive services, that this is a stage and will pass. The parent must be patient and tolerant. Parental separation now will often trigger the past loss of the parent and leaving at this early stage is very hard, especially for children under the age of 8.
3. **Suspicious/Angry:** Children, especially the older ones, may display signs of suspiciousness with the parent, as they may be anticipating a return to the "old ways" of drug use or criminal activity. Their attitude toward the returning parent can be edged with their suspicion and the parent needs to anticipate this and be provided with the tools to be good listeners and recognize this as a reaction to the parental loss and not get angry. It is normal and will end. The only exception is when the parent has been incarcerated numerous times throughout the child's childhood and they may have simply "given up" on their parent changing.
4. **Testing the Limits:** (Children can begin to release their internalizing and isolation during this stage) Children are our best limit testers, with growth and development stages often transitioning with limit testing, and this is especially true when a parent has been away in these circumstances, including during incarceration, foster care placement or military deployment. As Ann Adalist-Estrin aptly describes in her stages of re-entry, the child is manifesting their concern and conflict with their behavior, saying "Can I show my feelings, ask the questions that no one would answer or I was afraid to ask while my parent was gone, or should I keep them to myself?"
5. **Resolution/Adjustment:** If re-entry and reunification are going well, children's feelings begin to surface, with question-asking by the children, unfolding many of the secrets that were maintained during the parent's incarceration, roles are developing, hopefully, new ones, resistance to change may be experienced but supported by service providers, and children can risk re-attaching.
6. **Re-Testing:** Depending on the length of separation and the age of the children, after things may be progressing relatively well, the parent may experience a recurrence of the Testing the Limits stage. This recurrence is predictable for children who have endured multiple separations and simply a request for reaffirmation that the parent will not be leaving again.

Adapted from Stages of Homecoming, originally published in "Homecoming: Children's Adjustment to Parents Parole, " by Ann Adalist-Estrin, M.S.National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated, Copyright FCN 2003 [www.fcnetwork.org](http://www.fcnetwork.org)



## **Risk Factors for Children with Incarcerated Parents**

As a caregiver of a child with a parent in jail or prison, you should be aware of some risk factors that might affect your child. You have a lot of influence over how your child is growing up and the choices he or she makes. Talk with your child openly and honestly to reduce these risks to your child.

### **Trouble dealing with feelings**

Children with a parent in jail or prison may have a hard time dealing with their feelings, and their actions and behavior might show this. Children might have:

- Nightmares or trouble sleeping.
- Temper tantrums.
- A hard time concentrating.
- Anxiety.
- Fears about being away from you.

Pay attention to your child's feelings and whether their feelings might be causing behavior problems. Encourage and support your child. Ask for help if you or your child need it to deal with difficult feelings or behavior.

### **Getting in trouble with the law**

Some experts say that a child who has a parent in jail or prison is more likely than other children to get involved in crime. This does not mean that your child will end up breaking the law. It means that, as the caregiver, you should be aware of this risk. Talk with your child often about rules and consequences, let them know that they can talk to you no matter what, and let them know that they are a good person.

### **Problems at school**

*The child's strong feelings could lead them to act out, have problems with friends, or have trouble concentrating or doing their school work.*

Get help from people you trust at the school to help your child be successful in school. Many times, teachers don't know about a difficult family situation. If you talk with your child's teacher about what is going on with the child, the teacher might be able to help. It can also help the teacher to better understand the child's behavior.

***These problems don't happen with every child whose parent is in prison or jail, but as the caregiver, it is important for you to be aware of these risks so you can help your child.***

### Special for the caregiver

## **This is Hard Work! What About Me?**

It is hard work to take care of a child whose parent is in jail or prison! Remember to take good care of yourself, too. Create a strong support network for yourself, that could include:

- A pastor or spiritual advisor
- Family and friends
- Your family doctor
- School social workers
- A support group
- A private counselor

Get plenty of exercise, and take time to do things you enjoy. You can reduce your stress in a 1

- Breathe. When you feel tense, take 10 slow, deep breaths.
- Communicate. Be honest with yourself and others.
- Drink at least eight 8-oz. glasses of water a day.
- Be human. Forgive yourself and others. Slow down and enjoy being alive.
- Find humor in life. Laugh at yourself and life. Have fun and 'play' at life.





## **Children of Incarcerated Parent “A Bill of Rights”**

I have the right to be kept safe and informed at the time of my parent's arrest.

I have the right to be heard when decisions are made about me.

I have the right to be considered when decisions are made about my parent.

I have the right to be well cared for in my parent's absence.

I have the right to speak with, see and touch my parent.

I have the right to support as I face my parent's incarceration.

I have the right to not be judged, blamed or labeled because my parent is incarcerated.

I have the right to a lifelong relationship with my parent.

Taken from: [www.sfcipp.org/index.html](http://www.sfcipp.org/index.html)  
This Bill of Rights was developed by the  
San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership

## Resources for Children of Incarcerated Parents, Their Caregivers & Professionals Who Work With Them

### **PROGRAMS FOR CHILDREN WITH INCARCERATED PARENTS:**

- After school program for children with incarcerated parents in Lancaster; Tuesdays and Thursdays; run by Kon-nectingservices, Inc; Contact Sandra Johnson at 717-598-9681 Email: [kon-nectingservices@comcast.net](mailto:kon-nectingservices@comcast.net) Website: <http://kon-nectingservices.net>
- Mentoring: Big Brothers Big Sisters in Lancaster - Amachi mentoring program for children with incarcerated parents; Contact Cheryl Taylor at 717-397-7567 Email: [ctaylor@bbbslanaster.org](mailto:ctaylor@bbbslanaster.org) Website: [www.bbbslanaster.org/](http://www.bbbslanaster.org/)
- After school music program for children with incarcerated parents in Lancaster: SWAN. Program may be able to provide free instruments and lessons. Contact Diana Vuolo at 484-888-6865 Email: [info@swan4kids.org](mailto:info@swan4kids.org) Website: [www.swan4kids.org](http://www.swan4kids.org)

### **PROGRAMS FOR CAREGIVERS/ADULTS WITH AN INCARCERATED LOVED ONE:**

- Support group for adult family members and friends with a loved one in prison  
LOCATION: Trinity Lutheran Church, 31 S Duke St, Lancaster, PA  
TIME: 1st and 3rd Wednesday of each month, 6pm - 7:30pm  
Contact: Trinity Lutheran Church, Phone 717-397-2734  
Website: <http://trinitylanaster.org/SupportGroup.pdf>
- Children living with relatives other than mom or dad or unrelated adults are almost always eligible to receive cash assistance and medical assistance benefits. The adult has to apply at the Lancaster County Assistance Office.  
Contact: 717-299-7421, or visit the office at 832 Manor Street, Lancaster, PA
- Caregivers may also seek legal advice and advocacy from MidPenn Legal Services to obtain benefits for the children if they've been denied  
Contact: 717-299-0971 and speak to reception staff.  
Address: MidPenn Legal Services, 38 N. Christian Street, Suite 200, Lancaster, PA 17602
- Family Reunification Project run by Kon-nectingservices, Inc, assists parents and caregivers with prison visits, fosters strong/healthy relationships, assists with severe financial needs and offers parenting classes.  
Contact: Sandra Johnson; P: 717-598-9681 E: [kon-nectingservices@comcast.net](mailto:kon-nectingservices@comcast.net)  
Website: <http://kon-nectingservices.net/>
- Weekly Prayer Gathering for all involved in the criminal justice system held every non-holiday Monday from 12:05-12:35pm in Rengier Chapel at Trinity Lutheran Church, 31 S Duke St, Lancaster, PA. Phone: 717 397-2734.

## BOOKS/PUBLICATIONS:

- "What Will Happen To Me?" by Howard Zehr and Lorraine Stutzman Amstutz - photos and stories of kids of all ages whose parents are or have been incarcerated
- "All Alone in the World" by Nell Bernstein – comprehensive look at the impact on children of incarcerated parents at every stage of the criminal justice process, from a parent's arrest to trial, sentencing, incarceration and their return home
- A Terrible Thing Happened - A Story for Children Who Have Witnessed Violence or Trauma, by Margaret M. Holmes, Sasha J. Mudlaff and Cary Pillo
- Let's Talk About When Your Parent is in Jail by Maureen K. Wittbold
- Lots of Feelings, a story by Shelley Rother
- Dealing with Feelings Parents Guide: [www.kidvision.org/feelings/guide.pdf](http://www.kidvision.org/feelings/guide.pdf)

## OTHER RESOURCES:

- **Children of Incarcerated Parents (COIP) Network of Lancaster County** – a coalition of individuals, agencies and institutions concerned for the welfare of children of incarcerated parents and their families; meets monthly to work on ways to strengthen the family bonds and developmental assets of children of incarcerated parents and their families through identification, education and advocacy  
Contact Bob Cooper at 717-872-7794; Email: [coipnlc@comcast.net](mailto:coipnlc@comcast.net)
- **Lancaster County Reentry Management Organization (RMO)** - a collaborative effort between social service agencies, churches, the Lancaster County Prison, Probation & Parole, CareerLink and others to improve community safety by helping people transitioning out of prison back to the Lancaster County community to become productive citizens and remain crime-free. Contact Melanie G. Snyder at 717-723-1075  
Email [melaniegsnyder@yahoo.com](mailto:melaniegsnyder@yahoo.com) Website <http://lancastercountyreentry.org>
- **Family and Corrections Network (FCN)** - provides ways for those concerned with families of prisoners to share information and experiences in an atmosphere of mutual respect. W: <http://www.fcnetwork.org>

**This publication has been compiled and is provided by the  
Children of Incarcerated Parents Network of Lancaster County, PA**  
[coipnlc@comcast.net](mailto:coipnlc@comcast.net)

and

Lancaster County **RMO** Re-Entry Management Organization

313 W. Liberty St., Suite 114 Lancaster, PA 17603 717-735-0333

<http://lancastercountyreentry.org>